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Seoul's Northern Strategy

SEOUL—Although trade and the American military presence are the visible U.S.-South Korean frictions, the longer-term danger may be Seoul's "northern policy": overtures by Asia's newest democracy for closer relations with Moscow, Beijing and lesser Communist states to help induce North Korea to make peace.

President Roh Tae Woo's move to transform Pyongyang's 35 years of terror into cooperation and, someday, reunification is tricky business. The Reagan-Bush administration backs his search for better relations with Communist states, but Seoul's helping Moscow to pump Siberian gas or China to build computers could turn unpopular with congressional conservatives who have been the mainstay for keeping U.S. troops here.

The potential danger lies in Bush's intention to link Western aid for Communist countries with Soviet willingness to reach political settlements in regions of major East-West confrontation. If South Korea didn't cooperate in such efforts at linkage, it could cause problems in Congress.

Such a prospect hardly seemed possible even a year ago, when the worry was a peaceful transition to democracy. That South Korea has truly abandoned authoritarian government is beyond question. "A return to military rule is unthinkable," Yi Hon Gu, minister of unification, told us over breakfast. "We are not Latin America."

President Roh, flushed with his Olympics success, is proving to be a more subtle and savvy political leader than anyone expected when he took office in February after the first closely contested election in Korean history. His ruling Justice Party failed to get a majority in the National Assembly, but his campaign for closer relations with the communist world and North Korea have given him a popular political base.

These favorable political developments accompany four years of double-digit economic growth, which means booming economic power. But the United States still lies at the center of everything that happens here.

Thus, congressional wailing about South Korea's $9 billion annual trade surplus with the United States is translated here into out-of-date big brotherism. Korean politicians were aghast when Michael Dukakis indulged in economic nationalism during his campaign.

Another source of friction is Seoul's insistence on ending U.S. operational command of U.S.-South Korean forces. Linked to that sore point is the demand that the U.S. military move out of Seoul, where the U.S. golf course is an irritant. Attacks on American servicemen are at an all-time high.

But both the trade deficit and the military presence are remediable. Roh has quietly assured the United States that South Korea will pay for the relocation of U.S. headquarters (and provide another golf course). The upcoming Uruguay Round of tariff negotiations also will give the United States a crack at removing Korean restrictions on U.S. agriculture and other exports.

That leaves Roh's northern strategy. The figures are rapidly mounting: commercial exchanges with Communist states were up 740 percent in the past year. In 1987, China led with $1.6 billion in trade, the Soviet Union was next with $200 million, followed by East Germany and Poland. Full diplomatic missions soon will be exchanged with Hungary, and there are confidential government proposals for extending economic aid to North Korea.

When Roh saw President Reagan in the White House last month, he won endorsement of his northern policy. Reagan outlined minor U.S. concessions to tame North Korea's Kim Il Sung, the world's last surviving Stalinist leader. According to intelligence sources, he and his heir-apparent son ordered the bombing of the Korean airliner a year ago and the assassination of high South Korean officials.

What worries Washington is that although Moscow has ordered communist countries to buy everything of value they can from Seoul, Soviet military aid to North Korea continues. MiG 29s were delivered in June. The explosion on board KAL 858 was reportedly made possible with the help of Soviet and East European espionage agents, a fact known to American intelligence and the subject of a bitter complaint to Moscow before the Seoul Olympics.

The Games went off without a single security hitch, with nearly all Communist states following Moscow's instructions to attend. But will Mikhail Gorbachev exert that control on behalf of Roh's campaign to soften up North Korea?

As of today, very little points to an affirmative answer. If that persists, a collision course between Washington and Seoul is possible. With the old irritant of a non-democratic regime here now gone and the trade and troop problems soluble, it would be tragic and ironic for the alliance to founder on how to deal with the Communist garrison state to the north.

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